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Title: Romantic legacy in non-romantic times : two different-similar approaches to searching for self-identity

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Citation style: Bemben Alicja, Mazur-Wyganowska Ewa. (2015). Romantic legacy in non-romantic times : two different-similar approaches to searching for self-identity. W: J. Szurman, A. Woźniakowska, K. Kowalczyk-Twarowski (red.), "The self industry : therapy and fiction" (S. 334-343). Katowice : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego



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Romantic Legacy in Non-Romantic Times Two Different-Similar Approaches to Searching for Self-Identity

Although the observations that Romanticism and Romantic ideas persist in literature and criticism¹ may be of limited critical value, they serve as useful points of departure for understanding why Romanticism continues to be stimulating for generations of post-Romantic poets. Why in times of reason, logic and science might a poet turn to nature, mysticism and spirituality? Why are certain features revived in poetry whereas others are generally rejected or accepted only by individuals?

The following essay is an endeavour to answer these questions. Its main thesis is derived from the conviction that an individual's process of self-definition occurs not only by means of reasoning and logic but also through spirituality and imagination. It holds that when, in the age of reason, logic and science fail to provide meanings and facilitate self-definition, room is made for imagination, spirituality and mysticism which might enhance the defining of the self. On the examples of two modern poets, Patrick Kavanagh and Robert Graves, we would like to show how in the case of poetic self-definition, turning to imagination, mysticism and spirituality may further the search for poetic identity.

Despite abundant literary affinities, such as Georgianism, war poetry and the poetry of emotional conflict, Robert Graves created his *magnum opus*, the

¹ Marshall Brown, *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism. Volume 5. Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1; and David Simpson, "Romanticism, Criticism and Theory," in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. Stuart Currant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1–24.

mythopoeic theory of the White Goddess, in considerable detachment from the cultural-literary trends of early twentieth-century Europe. Disillusionment with and divergence from the modern world, being for the poet the aftermath of World War I, pushed him to redefine his poetic self. The outcome of Graves's search for poetic identity was the creation of a poetic universe ruled by the White Goddess,² in which poetry was *spiritus movens* and in which he lived the life of a poet hymning the muse. Firstly, the poet was a devotee of the Goddess for whom he wrote and from whom gained his inspiration. He used poetry to shape the poetic universe and his poetic self. Secondly, his poetry was concurrently addressed to the White Goddess and an effect of her inspiration. In this way, the poet defined his self and created his poetic universe. Thirdly, the White Goddess – the source of inspiration and addressee of his poetry – provided the poetic rules for both the shaping of the universe and poetic identity.

Graves's adoption of such a perspective for the interpretation of reality and himself as a poet has two crucial implications for this essay. First of all, its result is deliberately autobiographical, personal and self-serving poetry, which with respect to the content conveyed is cohesive with the author's opinions. Moreover, behind the White Goddess myth stands, among other things, the Romantic fascination with nature, mysticism and spirituality. Therefore, the intellectual value of this construct lies not only in the minimization of the breach between Graves's real life and the world depicted in his poetry, but also in an unconventionally creative way of adapting Romantic ideas to the personal mythology of Graves which furthered the poet's self-definition.

Graves believed that a poet was to tell "one story and one story only,"³ hymning the White Goddess, his muse. She was the lady of his heart, incarnated in an earthly woman, to whom he confessed his love. In return, she bestowed on him inspiring dreams, trances and visions to be put into verse. The consequences of such Romantic worship were stringent rules that the poet had to follow, but which, paradoxically, allowed him to concentrate on his poetic self-development.

Firstly, the inspiration was a gift from the Goddess which the poet did not actually have to seek. Graves's interpretation of all events as signs from the muse made inspiration obvious and it was merely a question of time:

When a dream is born in you
With a sudden clamorous pain,
When you know the dream is true

² Robert Graves, *The White Goddess. A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Noonday, 1973).

³ Robert Graves, "To Juan at the Winter Solstice," in *Robert Graves. Selected Poems*, ed. Paul O'Prey (Michigan: Penguin 1986), 158.

And lovely, with no flaw no stain,
 O then, be careful, or with sudden clutch
 You'll hurt the delicate thing you prize so much.⁴

In a dream or trance the Goddess spoke to her poet, gave him visions and guided him through mazes of intuitive thinking. What the poet was left to do was to put "the delicate thing" into verse and perfect it to please his Goddess. Presented with inspiration, the poet was spared the need to wonder about its potential sources and reasons; he could concentrate on forging the ideas into words.

Being limited to the themes connected with the muse also facilitated the development of Graves's poetic self. As much as the granted inspiration freed him from the burden of searching for ideas for poems, the topical restrictions enhanced the quality of the verse he created. Instead of getting sidetracked by minor issues, the poet concentrated on perfecting his lines. The point for the poet was not to write in abundance, but to explore the depths of his feelings for the Goddess, to put quality over quantity.

Moreover, as the muse's lover, Graves did not write for the masses; he did not want to win fame or honours. The rules of the Goddess were clear: poetic life for absolute devotion. Any departure from commitment to the muse triggered a loss of poetic integrity and sincerity. The integrity of the poetic self, preserved when the author composed out of poetic necessity, fell apart when he subjected himself to external influences and created without the inspiration of the Goddess. In turn, sincerity required writing about personal and direct experiences.⁵ His meetings with the muse, which happened in the poet's dreams and trances, or with her earthly incarnations, were these personal and direct experiences which he was to put into verse. Composing for the muse granted the poet a life in the poetic universe and consequently one with inspiration, integrity and sincerity.

The relation between them was circular in the sense that the poet wrote to praise her, she acknowledged the tribute and, in turn, gave him further inspiration to write on. Thus, for the poetic self, the remaining elements of the poetic universe were the means by which it created, sustained and developed itself. From this perspective, the Gravesian poet may be said to write for himself, for his own poetic development.

The Graves of the pre-Goddess period moved from Georgianism, admiring the beauty of rural landscapes, through patriotic war-poetry, to poetry of emotional conflict in an attempt to appease his neurasthenia. However, none of these fascinations made Graves feel he was engaged in writing true poetry. We can only

⁴ Graves, "A Pinch of Salt," in *Fairies and Fusiliers*, ed. Robert Graves (New York: Heinemann, 1918), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/10122>.

⁵ George Stade, *Columbia Essays on Modern Writers. Robert Graves* (Irvington, New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 4–5.

deduce that this was the case because his poems were embedded in logic, reason and materialism, which were not enough for Graves. After the tragedies of World War I he considered twentieth-century England to be a country filled with:

traces of ghostly struggle
for the entrails torn from the earth
here sweat is growing and apathy
wooden pavements of good intentions
bad illusions on which is raised
the shining edifice of so-called prosperity⁶

All that he believed in, all that he fought for, turned out to put humanity “on the death curse” and the poet could no longer define himself by means of science, reason and logic. Turning to muse poetry became a catharsis which fully revealed to Graves the futility of the mechanistic world and freed him from abiding by its rules. Common logic or objective truths were no longer of importance – “poetic unreason” and poetic truth⁷ became principles against which to define and interpret the surrounding world.

Poetry then, functioned as a tool for the creation of both Graves’s poetic self and his poetic universe. The universe existed not so much as an alternative world, but rather as an alternative interpretation of the world. For an object, person or happening to become a part of the universe required them to be interpreted as constituents of the myth of the White Goddess. When described in poetic terms, they automatically took roles and functions provided by the myth. And so Graves’s wives and lovers were incarnations of the muse, their departures were reflections of the Goddess’s customary ridding herself of her suitors, and their gifts were talismans possessing divine power. The poetic universe of Graves consisted of real people, things and events; what made a difference was their interpretation.

Similarly, the poet’s self was also shaped by poetry. As has already been mentioned, poetic interpretation gave objects, people and events meaning within the White Goddess myth. Since Graves considered himself the muse’s lover and poet, he ascribed to himself the role of the mythical partner of the Goddess, the God of the Waxing and Waning Year. Moreover, apart from assigning him meaning within the myth, poetry also supplied principles for self-development. In return for the passionate devotion, it gave his poetic self integrity and sincerity. With each address to the Goddess, Graves built up his poetic universe and poetic self.

⁶ Robert Graves, “On the Bolton – Manchester Line.” in *Duet*, ed. B. Tamborski (London 1975), 3.

⁷ Stade, *Columbia Essays on Modern Writers*, 37.

The third constituent of Graves's poetic universe was the Goddess, whose role was to inspire him, provide him with poetic rules, and receive his poetry as her due tribute. The figure of the muse is drawn from an ancient rite of annual sacrifice to a lunar deity identified by Graves as the White Goddess. In the ritual, which was an imitation of the natural cycle of life and death, the God of the Waning Year, who represented death and decay, was replaced by the God of the Waxing Year, a representative of new life. In return for the sacrifice, the White Goddess made performers of the ceremony fall into trances; her poets experienced inspirational visions as the new cycle of life was initiated. Her role then was that of a stimulant and catalyst.

The constituents of Graves's poetic universe possessed functions resulting not only from the fact that they were part of it, but also from the interactions that occurred between them. Having a closer look at the interactions between the White Goddess and the poet we can identify her remaining tasks. Firstly, as Graves rejected absolute systems such as philosophies or religions, he needed some personal system to live by. The White Goddess myth and its poetic universe became his personal system, which he substituted for religion. Secondly, also in a Romantic vein of opposing mechanistic laws and rational understanding, the poet turned to intuitive knowledge and thinking:

In which the emancipated reason might
Learn in due time to walk at greater length
And more answerably.⁸

Graves averred that although reason and logic enabled cognition, they were at the same time its limits. What could be known and understood was only what reason and logic could lead to. Everything that was beyond, that was "swifter than reason,"⁹ was accessible only through intuitive thinking in which the Goddess was his guide.

Finally, as has already been mentioned, the muse was also responsible for enhancing imagination of the poet. Not only did she guide him in his imaginative thinking, but also provided feelings and impulses for self-definition. As all objects, people and events entering the poetic universe of Graves were signs from the muse, his life was a constant flow of signals confirming her presence and stimulating him to create.

Patrick Kavanagh, regarded as one of the leading Irish poets of the 20th century, is an example of an individual who, although encircled by the rationality

⁸ D. N. Carter: *Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1989), 31.

⁹ Douglas Day: *Swifter Than Reason. The Poetry and Criticism of Robert Graves* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1963).

and logic of the 20th century, rejected modern values and managed to create his own, unique poetic personality, derived from several norms originating in the Romantic Era. His poetry is rooted in the places of his birth and residence, and Kavanagh could not depict their beauty and mysticism without reaching back to the Romantic legacy of his ancestors. He was a unique poet who searched for self-identity through creating poetry, and defined his personality through his poetic self. Kavanagh's identity was strictly combined with the poetry he created. Because he believed that he had a mission that had to be fulfilled in the society, poetry was his tool to convey his views and opinions. That is the reason why his poetry had nothing in common with self-fashioning – Kavanagh depicted his genuine personality in his poems. He was not concerned about any socially acceptable standards. He did not consider himself to be an artist in the sense of a man who is appreciated by critics and public opinion. In the poem *Portrait of the Artist* Kavanagh summarizes his life and his attitude to poetry:

I never lived, I have no history,
I deserted no wife to take another,
I rooted in a room and leave – this message.¹⁰

In this poem, Kavanagh clearly defines his intention – to convey beliefs and ideas to society. He did not connect being an artist with fame, splendor, or leading life full of escapades and adventures. He found his identity in creating verse, in a conviction that he was able to influence the world that surrounded him. In the Preface to his *Collected Poems* Kavanagh presented his Romantic approach to the search for the self-identity:

There is, of course, a poetic movement which sees poetry materialistically. The writers of this school see no transcendent nature in the poet; they are practical chaps, excellent technicians. But somehow or other I have a belief in poetry as a mystical thing, and a dangerous thing.¹¹

This materialistic “movement” mentioned by Kavanagh surrounded him, and, at the same time, limited the poet's mind and sense of freedom. Creating “safe” poetry aimed at being appreciated by the critics did not allow for a wide-range development of the poet's imagination. Therefore, Kavanagh chose “dangerous” poetry – he risked that his literary output might not be valued by the reviewers. He resigned from the commercial and materialistic aspect of his literary works and decided to create mystical, spiritual poetry.

¹⁰ Kavanagh, “Portrait of the Artist,” in *Collected Poems* (New York: Norton, 1973), 121.

¹¹ Kavanagh, “Preface,” in *Collected Poems*, xiii.

Kavanagh himself claimed that his works are best read without any comments from scholars: at the very beginning of his preface he stated "I have never been much considered by the English critics."¹² In his poems he praises the rural landscape and people. He believed in the unique wisdom of the uneducated, in the mystical features of the country's landscape, of the places "where ghostly poplars whisper to a silent countryside."¹³ Simultaneously, Kavanagh denies the value of technological and scientific development and of commonly accepted ancient knowledge:

Splendours of Greek,
Egypt's cloud-woven glory
Speak not more, speak
Speak no more
A thread-worn story.¹⁴

That is the reason why Kavanagh himself called his poetry dangerous. He was aware that rejecting commonly accepted truths probably would not be approved by the critics. Being conscious of this risk, he established his own, unique mode of creating. According to Kavanagh, nothing is obvious in poetry; it is impossible to interpret poems in one commonly established way. He stated that "A sweeping statement is the only statement worth listening to. The critic without faith gives balanced opinions, usually about second-rate writers."¹⁵ Kavanagh rejected the conventional literary criticism that was prevalent among twentieth century writers and poets. By making such a statement he admitted his contempt for the established norms, and his preference for his own individual way to create a personal poetic self that satisfied his own ego, not that of those around him.

In his poetry Kavanagh turned to the holy, the mystical and the spiritual. Despite living in a twentieth-century world full of science and technology, he claimed that turning to nature was the only approach to establishing one's individuality.

Now in the passionate moon
The no-good dames
Tattoo my flesh with the indelible
Ink of lust.¹⁶

¹² Kavanagh, "Preface," xiii.

¹³ Kavanagh, "The Intangible," in *Collected Poems*, 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁵ Source: <http://www.famousquotesabout.com/quote/A-sweeping-statement-is/442050>.

¹⁶ Kavanagh, "At Noon," in *Collected Poems*, 21.

Earth was a holy place for him: he claimed that the innocence of the human soul was being destroyed by the industrialization and technology of modern life. In her book describing the mystical imagination of the poet's literary works, Una Agnew states, "Kavanagh's poetry is the principal vehicle of his spirituality."¹⁷ The land in which he was born, Inniskeen, influenced and transformed his spirit. One may thus claim that his life was a kind of mystical journey, and his poems are the consequences of his unique, mystical voyage. The poet's spiritual longing to be closer to uncovering the world's principles appeared in one of his poems, *Blind Dog*:

I follow the blind dog,
Crying to my star: O star
Of a passionate pagan's desire,
Lead me to the truths that are.¹⁸

In this voyage, the connection with Polish Romanticism is easily noticed in the common sense of a mission for the poet in the society. Kavanagh claimed that his unique role as a poet is to protect society from the dangers of materialism and the cruelty of life. He compared these representations of depravity to a kind of "fog" that must be removed from people's minds so that they might be purified. These visions he shared with the neo-Romantic Irish poet William Butler Yeats and with one of the chief representatives of English Romanticism, William Blake. Kavanagh in his poetry frequently appeals to the Christian faith to emphasize his sense of mission. For him, a poet is a theologian and his role is a kind of calling, whose purpose is to convey Christian ideas to the society.

To Your high altar I once came
Proudly, even brazenly, and I said:
Open your tabernacles I too am flame
Ablaze on the hills of Being.¹⁹

The poet mentions the City of God. He combines Romantic ideals with the Christian faith. According to Kavanagh, God is not a distant and abstract idea, but truly exists among people. He is present in everything he has created – in the fields, flowers and all elements of nature – "The maiden of Spring is with child By the Holy Ghost."²⁰ As a consequence, there is no Augustinian gap any more between "the City of the World" and "the City of God." This perspective is very

¹⁷ Una Agnew, *The Mystical Imagination of Patrick Kavanagh* (Dublin: Columba Press, 1998), 11.

¹⁸ Kavanagh, "Blind Dog," in *Collected Poems*, 17.

¹⁹ Kavanagh, "Worship," in *Collected Poems*, 12.

²⁰ Kavanagh, "April," in *Collected Poems*, 18.

close to the Romantic ideals of praising nature, giving it a unique and mystical role in people's faith.

After analysing the Romantic features that were adapted by Kavanagh and Graves, it is possible to conclude that certain characteristics borrowed from the Romantic period were valuable for these two twentieth-century poets in creating a unique and extraordinary poetic self. Kavanagh's places of birth and residence were central to his individuality and his native countryside was for him a constant source of inspiration. He used the Romantic vision of nature as something holy and spiritual, because it was impossible for him to depict the charm and magnificence of those places by using contemporary poetic devices based principally on reason and logic. Rejecting conventional literary criticism, claiming that poetry cannot be interpreted in one established way, was connected with the Romantic belief that all conventional norms should be eliminated because emotions and passions are the only tools which are able to perceive the world accurately. Kavanagh used all these devices to create his unique poetic self, as his sense of mission in the society, turning to the holy and spiritual in nature, did not correspond to contemporary literary trends and movements. He was a man living in the twentieth century, yet his soul and poetic identity could not integrate with contemporary norms. That is the major reason Kavanagh reached for the Romantic legacy.

Graves's motivation to turn towards intuitive thinking, spirituality and nature in his poetic practice resulted from his disillusionment with the world of reason, rationality and logic. He saw reason, rationalism and logic as the forces that stood behind materialism, decay and war. Unable to understand the absurdity of the wars that they had brought about and unwilling to move forward by their means Graves found himself locked in the twentieth-century cage of reason. The way out of it could be only something which would go beyond reason, offer eternal truths and also give the possibility of understanding. Poetry which was permeated with a Romantic attraction to nature, mysticism and spirituality provided an alternative to beauty-oriented Georgianism, patriotic war-poetry and the rationalizing poetry of emotional conflict. It gave Graves poetic truths and principles that he could hold and which facilitated the development of his poetic self.

Romanticism continues to provide stimulation for generations of post-Romantic poets because it puts forward values, and allows for sources of inspiration and impulses alternative to those propagated during the age of reason. It rejects objective truths and absolute systems in favour of subjective values and individual systems which tend to put their creator at the centre. It gives priority to mysticism and spirituality, and generally to feelings and sensations, in which poetry tends to excel more than it does against the backdrop of reason, logic and materialism. Kavanagh and Graves drew from the Romantic legacy to create their own, unique poetic selves. Although the road they took to achieve it differed, the final result of their search for the self-identity was similar.

Alicja Bemben, Ewa Mazur-Wyganowska

Romantyczne dziedzictwo w nieromantycznych czasach Dwa różne/podobne sposoby poszukiwania tożsamości

Streszczenie

Wiele prac wskazuje na znaczący wpływ, jaki romantyczne dziedzictwo ma na twórczość współczesną. Dwudziestowieczni poeci i filozofowie żyjący w tych jakże nieromantycznych czasach mimo wszystko deklarowali swoje przywiązanie do romantycznych idei. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest skonfrontowanie dwóch podejść do tworzenia poezji, poszukiwania odrębności i pracy nad rozwojem intelektualnym i poetyckim. Robert Graves i Patrick Kavanagh to nie tylko poeci, ale i wielcy filozofowie poezji. Kavanagh czerpał z mistycyzmu, wyobraźni, z tego co nieodkryte i niepoznane. Graves podkreślał rolę wizji sennych, katartyczny charakter poezji i jej magiczne pochodzenie. Twórcy Ci reprezentują więc różne a zarazem i podobne podejście do poszukiwania tożsamości.

Alicja Bemben, Ewa Mazur-Wyganowska

Patrimoine romantique aux temps non romantiques Deux moyens différents/semblables de chercher son identité

Résumé

Beaucoup de textes scientifiques démontrent l'influence considérable qu'exerce le patrimoine romantique sur la littérature contemporaine. Des poètes et philosophes du XX^e siècle vivant aux temps tellement non romantiques déclaraient, malgré tout, leur attachement aux idées romantiques. L'objectif du présent article consiste à confronter deux approches liées à la création poétique, à la recherche d'une particularité ainsi qu'au travail sur le développement intellectuel et poétique. Robert Graves et Patrick Kavanagh sont non seulement des poètes, mais aussi de grands philosophes de poésie. Kavanagh puisait dans le mysticisme, dans l'imagination, bref, dans tout ce qui n'était pas découvert et connu. Graves soulignait le rôle des visions oniriques, le caractère cathartique de la poésie et son origine magique. Ces créateurs représentent alors une attitude à la fois différente et semblable envers la quête d'identité.